

THE UNSOLVED ARYAN PROBLEM

Filippo Sassetti, a merchant from Florence, was on a business trip to Goa for about five years from 1583. He was struck by the similarities between Italian (or its mother language Latin) and Sanskrit of India. Not being a scholar, he did not try to find the reasons. But his preliminary observations posed an important question before the academic world - why there should be similarities between different languages¹?

The question of relationship between languages was seriously probed for the first time by Joseph Scaliger (1540-1609), who divided the languages of Europe into four different groups and tried to find out the nature of relationship between the members of each group, but denied any relationship between the groups. In 1767 James Parsons broadened the base of the study. On the basis of the Biblical story about the re-settlement of the world after the great deluge by Noah's three sons Shem, Ham and Japheth and their families (Genesis, 10, 1f), Parsons divided the known human groups and languages into three sections - Semite (Arabs, Jews, etc.), Hamite (Egyptian, Cushite, etc.) and Japhetic. In the last category he included Celtic, Greek, Italic, Germanic, Slavic and even Iranian

¹ *Lettere edite e inedite di Filippo Sassetti raccolte annotate da Ettore Marcucci*, Firenze, 1855, p. 417; S.R. BANERJEE (ed.), *Essays on Indo-European Linguistics*, Calcutta, 1990, p. x.

(Persian) and Indic (Bengali) languages. Pursuing an indication given in the Bible Parsons realised a historical truth about the relationship between several European and Asian languages ².

This relationship was probed deeper by William Jones. In his annual address delivered at the Asiatic Society in 1786, Jones observed that «the Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either; yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in roots of verbs and in forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which perhaps, no longer exists. There is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family»³. This speech marked the beginning of the study of comparative philology in modern age.

In the beginning of the 19th century the common sources of the primitive language (*Stammsprache*) was named "Indo-European". The name was proposed by Thomas Young in 1813. In the first half of the 19th century the real foundation of the study of Indo-European philology was laid by four scholars - F. Schlegel, J. Grimm, R. Rask and Franz Bopp. In 1808 Schlegel introduced the study of comparative grammar. The other three dealt with vocabulary and morphology. This line of research was furthered by A. Schleicher (1821-1868). By comparing the forms and meanings of numerous words of different Indo-European languages (keeping in mind the grammatical rules of each of them), he tried to reconstruct the vocabulary of the primitive Indo-European language. For an example, the words like *ajras* (Sanskrit), *agros* (Greek), *ager* (Latin), *akrs* (Gothic), etc., all meaning "a field", led Schleicher to

² For a lucid summary of these early studies, see J. P. MALLORY, *In Search for the Indo-Europeans - Language, Archaeology and Myth*, London, 1989.

³ *Asiatick Researches*, vol. I, pp. 348-349.

believe that the original Indo-European form of the words was *agras*, meaning "a field". The Indo-European philology became further consolidated through the researches of K. Brugmann and B. Delbrück. The results of their investigations were published in the last two decades of the 19th century⁴.

Meanwhile attempts had been made to introduce politics and ethnic questions in the academic field of Indo-European philology. In 1823 J. Klaproth proposed to call the relevant group of languages as Indo-Germanic, not in their relations with old German. Others believed in the historicity of the Indo-German speaking people belonging to the Nordic race. The attempts to find a race through a language received support by Penka's declaration that a «language is the organic product of an organism subject to organic laws»⁵.

The word *Ārya* got currency in the academic world of Europe in a qualitative sense since early 19th century conforming to one of its Indian imports. In 1847 Max Müller used the term in philological discussions. He labelled Sanskrit and the related languages as Aryan in contradistinction to the "aboriginal languages of India". J.C. Pritchard thought of an original racial stock (Aryan), whose descendants speaking the related languages, had spread from Scandinavia to the Ganges. C. Lassen praised «the Aryans as the most highly organised, the most enterprising and the most creative among the peoples». Imagining the primitive Aryans as of white complexion, he declared that the people of the highest castes in India were also the whitest. Thus not only the term *Ārya* became linguistically a synonym of "Indo-European" or "Indo-Germanic", but also, like these appellations, was given an ethnic character⁶.

The reasons behind all these attempts were to prove that the Indo-European or Aryan languages were Euro-Centric, that one of these languages and its speakers came to India from Europe and that

⁴ For a summary of the relevant views, see S. R. BANERJEE (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. XIII.

⁵ *Origines Aricae*, Vienna, 1883, p. 6.

⁶ D. SWARUP, "Genesis of the Aryan Theory, and its application to Indian History", in *The Aryan Problem*, edited by S. B. DEO and S. KAMATH, Pune, 1993, p. 30f.

these outsiders made India a great civilization (at that time the protagonists of these hypotheses had no idea about the Indus civilization). In 1838 J. Wilson declared that just as long ago a branch of the Aryans had come to India and had acquired dominion over the aboriginal people (*Dasyus*), so much later another branch of the same people came to the same country and "acquired dominion over the representatives of both *Aryans* and *Dasyus*"⁷. So the British were the legal and justifiable successors of the early Aryans in India. The name *Ārya* was used to the advantage of British imperialism.

Along with these misventures serious academic research was also carried on. A. Schleicher and J. Schmidt tried to trace the origin, developments and the nature of Indo-European languages. For various linguistic reasons different Indo-European languages, originating from one common source, were divided into two groups called Centum and Satem. In the latter group of languages the original palatal sound "k" was changed into palatal *sa*. [Greek "*ἡ κατὸν*" *ἐκατόν*, Latin "*centum*", Avestan "*sata*", old Indo-Aryan "*śatam*"- hundred]. The Centum group includes Greek, Latin, Germanic or Teutonic (Gothic), Celtic and Tokharian languages. The Satem group includes Old Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit-Vedic and Laukik), Old Iranian (*Avesta* and Old Persian Inscriptions), Armenian, Albanian and Balto-Slavic languages⁸. Of these languages the historicity of Tokharian came to be known in the early phase of the present century. The descendants of the relevant languages are also included in the Indo-European fold. The speakers and users of the descendant languages of the modern age (including English, Bengali, etc.) dominate the world.

∴ A comparative study of the close similarities between the Indo-European languages of the early stage indicates that at one time their users must have lived close to one another. They could have used a common Indo-European language, but did not necessarily belong to a common racial stock. On the basis of a comparative study of words of different languages having similar pronunciations and identical or

⁷ See n.6.

⁸ S.R. BANERJEE, *A Handbook of Sanskrit Philology*, pp. xx f.

similar imports one can prepare a vocabulary of the primitive Indo-European language and with the help of it one may try to determine the original habitat of its speakers. The method of study is called linguistic palaeontology. Towards the end of the last century and in the early phase of the present century O. Schrader used this method to get an idea about the speakers of the primitive Indo-European language and their culture and habitat. The results of this type of study indicate that the region concerned was a continental area (probably a steppe near a mountain), where horses could be reared up and which was also wooded enough for the roaming of bears and beavers. A type of corn was produced here. It was watered by a river. The main seasons were winter, summer and spring. In such a country there should have been no difficulty in the use of horses and chariots, which were very important to the speakers of the primitive Indo-European language⁹.

O. Schrader located the area concerned in the steppe of the southern region of the (erstwhile) "South Russian" steppe (now in Ukraine). Gordon Childe found in the several old burial mounds (Kurgan) of this territory skeletons of a type of tall people who had been dolichocephalic with well-built jaws and sharp nose. In other words they belonged to the Nordic race. Remains of horses and their trappings and also other materials recovered here reminded Childe of the presence of the Indo-European speaking people¹⁰. In recent times Marija Gimbutas has tried to demonstrate the presence of the horse using Indo-Europeans between the Don and the Dnieper in the period from c. 4500 to 3500 B.C. and near the Volga between c. 3500 and 2500 B.C.¹¹.

⁹ In this connection see the treatises of O. SCHROEDER, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Aryan People* (translated into English by Jevons), London, 1998; *Reallexikon der Indogermanischen Alterthumskunde*, 2nd edition, edited by A. NEHRING, 2 vols, Berlin and Leipzig, 1917 and 1929.

¹⁰ For GORDON CHILDE's arguments see his monograph *The Aryans - A Study in Indo-European Origins*, London, 1926.

¹¹ *American Anthropologist* 65 (1963), p. 815-816; *Current Anthropology* 27/4 (1986), p. 306 etc. See also R. S. SHARMA, *Looking For the Aryans*, Madras, 1995, pp. 18f.

The difficulty is that linguistic palaeontology may not have provided us with the full information about the original habitat of the Indo-Europeans. The same type of evidence induced W. Brandenstein to locate the homeland in the steppe to the south of the Urals¹² and influenced P. Giles to think of the well watered and corn producing plains and neighbouring steppe-like area of Hungary¹³. Other types of data have led scholars to suggest other zones, including parts of Central Asia¹⁴. Another fundamental question is about the assumed closed relationship of the horse with only the Indo-Europeans. The animal played significant role in the history of several other nomadic peoples.

Though Childe could not prove his theory about the Nordic origin of the Indo-Europeans, his writings in the third decade of this century (unwillingly ?) supported the contemporary attempt to find a superior status for the Indo-Europeans (or Aryans) in relation to other groups of the mankind. In 1926 he wrote in his famous monograph *The Aryans* that «the fact that the first Aryans were Nordics was not without importance. The physical quality of that stock did enable them by the bare fact of superior strength to conquer even more advanced peoples and so to impose their language on areas from where their bodily type has almost completely vanished. This is the truth underlying the panegyrics of the Germanists, the Nordic superiority in physique fitted them to be the vehicles of a superior language»¹⁵. This opinion should have been liked by the Nazis in the second quarter of the 20th century.

¹² *Die erste indogermanische Wanderung*, Vienna, 1936; R. C. MAJUMDAR (ed.), *The Vedic Age*, London, 1952, pp. 210-211.

¹³ P. GILES, "The Aryans", in *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. I, ed. by E.J. RAPSON, Cambridge, 1922, pp. 68-69.

¹⁴ Among the recent writings on the subject, see B. N. MUKHERJEE, "The Indo-European Question in Central Asia", in *The Aryan Problem*, pp. 58f; A.K. Narain, "Indo-Europeans in Inner Asia", in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. by D. SINOR, Cambridge, 1990, p. 154; etc. Among living scholars advocating for an area near the Arctic region as the homeland of the Aryans, we can refer to G. M. BONGARD-LEVIN, E. GRANTOVSKY, *The Origin of Aryans, From Scythia to India*, New Delhi, 1980, p. 121.

¹⁵ See the last page of the monograph of V. GORDON CHILDE's mentioned above in n. 10.

The presence of the Indo-Europeans (or Aryans) in the Indian subcontinent from an early time is well attested. The question is whether they were autochthones in the Indian subcontinent or came there from outside. R.E.M. Wheeler's theory of the Aryan invasion of Mohenjo Daro based on his interpretation of certain archaeological data¹⁶, is now completely discredited¹⁷. Similarly the attempts to associate the Aryans with the use of iron and painted grey ware are futile. The periods of the regular use of these materials are to be placed much later than the earliest evidence of the presence of the Aryans in India. No doubt the painted grey pottery has been noticed at the end of certain late Harappan sites (in Haryana, Punjab and Jammu). But these cannot prove by themselves the presence of the Aryans.

When in the second quarter of this century certain Indian scholars opposed the current Western view about the non-Indian origin of the Aryans they had a strong point¹⁸. The *Rigveda*, the earliest attested book of the Aryans, does not indicate them as outsiders. But the recent attempts to prove the Aryan origin of the urban civilization of the Indus-Sarasvatī region (c. 2600-1800 or 1750 B.C.) and to place the *Rigveda* before c. 5000 B.C. are based on speculations¹⁹.

The society as reflected in the *Rigveda* itself is essentially rural. Though it had a few *puras* (towns ?) (I, 189, 2), it was generally against such settlements (I, 53, 7; I, 103, 3 etc.). On the other hand, even if the Indus people are considered to have been acquainted with the horse, there is no evidence to prove that the animal was as important to them as it had been to the Aryans²⁰.

¹⁶ R.E. M. WHEELER, *The Indus Civilization*, 2nd edition, 1960, pp. 54f and 96f.

¹⁷ G.F. DALES, "The Mythical Massacre of Mohenjodaro", in *Expedition*. 9/3, pp. 36f; S.P. GUPTA, "Palaeo-Anthropology and Archaeology of the Vedic Aryans", in *The Aryan Problem*, pp. 157-161; etc.

¹⁸ For references to the relevant writings see *The Vedic Age*, pp. 215-217.

¹⁹ S. S. MISRA, *The Aryan Problem- A Linguistic Approach*, New Delhi, 1992, p. 16 and 84.

²⁰ R.S. SHARMA, *op. cit.*, pp. 22f.

D. Frawly dates the desiccation of the Sarasvatī, so famous in *Rigveda*, before the end of the Indus civilization²¹. N.S. Rajaram believes that the river dried up partly by c. 3000 B.C. and completely by c. 2000 or 1900 B.C.²². Archaeology and satellite photography, on which they have based their arguments, do not prove so. The evidence of the location of a number of P.G.W. sites on the Ghaggar bed (partly representing ancient Sarasvatī) only indicates that the desiccation had commenced by the beginning of the regular use of that ware²³. Similarly the claim that the language of the Indus seal inscriptions is Sanskrit is far from a proven fact²⁴. Nevertheless, Rajaram has several valid points against the protagonists of the theories of the Aryan invasion or migrations. But his main claim that the Vedic civilization had been in a fairly advanced stage by 4000 B.C.²⁵ is not based on any undisputed fact.

What is then the present position of the problem concerning the name *Ārya* (attested only in the Indian, Iranian and few other Indo-European languages)? The term *Ārya* had originally linguistic and cultural significances, though in later times it acquired a racial import. So far looking for the original Indo-Europeans or Aryans we should analyse the early Indo-European languages and collect from them cultural and geographical data. If the horse was a constant companion of the Aryans, who also bred and fostered the animal, then the original habitat of certain groups of the Indo-European speaking people should have been in a Eurasian steppe.

The epigraphic data from Tel-el-Amarna (Egypt), dated to c. 14th century B.C., and from Boghaz-Koi (Turkey), dated to a period from c. 16th century B.C., prove the presence of the speakers of a speech related to the Indo-European group of languages, having particular relations with Vedic Sanskrit. The language is called

²¹ D. FRAWLEY, *The Myth of the Aryan Invasion of India*, reprint, New Delhi, 1995, p. 25.

²² N.S. RAJARAM, *The Politics of History, The Aryan Invasion Theory and Subversion of Scholarship*, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 12-14 and 225.

²³ *Bulletin of the National Institute of Sciences in India*, 1 (1952), pp. 37f.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Hittite (which should better be called Nesian)²⁶. Onomastic evidence from epigraphs indicates the presence of the speakers of the relevant language in Turkey in c. 20th century B.C. In the 18th century B.C. the language of the Kassite invaders of Babylonia contained Indo-European elements²⁷.

If the speakers of the Hittite language were closely related to Vedic Sanskrit (and not Old Iranian), they could have been in West Asia on their way towards India or they reached West Asia from India, or both the groups started from a common habitat (in Central Asia) and parted their ways in the Iranian plateau area. Later the speakers of the Iranian language imposed themselves on the territory now in Iran and its neighbourhood (in Afghanistan), which had been earlier occupied by the speakers of a proto-Indo-Aryan language. These contacts produced Indo-Iranian similarities and contracts, not visible in the Hittite language²⁸.

We should not speculate further on this point. But it may be pointed out that letters with cerebral sounds are absent from all early Indo-European languages other than Sanskrit. On the other hand, they form a strong element in Dravidian speeches. This evidence may tend to suggest that the Sanskrit or proto-Indo-Aryan speakers received this characteristic after their advent into the subcontinent from outside. But some scholars try to give a different explanation of this evidence²⁹.

No doubt, extra-academic interest aggravated the Aryan problem in the past. Similar sings are also noticeable at present. If the Aryan culture can be proved to be of Indian origin and the creator of the Indus civilization and subsequent cultural developments, then one can think of a monolithic Indian culture at least right up to the advent of Islam. This hypothesis may serve a political purpose. But the truth lies elsewhere. The Indian culture in

²⁶ *The Cambridge Ancient History*, (revised edition), vol. I, pt. II, Cambridge, 1971, p. 831.

²⁷ See the volume mentioned in n.25.

²⁸ *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1973, pp. 123f.

²⁹ E. P. HAMP, "On the Indo-European Origins of the Retroflexes in Sanskrit", in *Essays on Indo-European Linguistics*, pp. 71f.

an amalgam of various cultures from an early age. It is essentially syncretistic in nature³⁰.

The political ideologies as well as academic reasons have prompted several scholars to write on the Aryans in recent years. While the majority of the Western and a great number of Indian scholars still count the Aryans as outsiders, an increasing number of Indians and some foreign writers advocate their Indian origin. To the pure academics the question is still an open one³¹.

³⁰ B. N. MUKHERJEE, *Itihāser(a) Āloke Ārya Samasyā* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1994, pp. 19-20.

³¹ The problem has not been solved even by the most recent publications including the one by M. J. SHENDGE, *The Aryas-Facts Without Fancy and Fiction*, New Delhi, 1996. Shendge has unconvincingly tried to disassociate the *Āryas* from the Indo-Europeans (or Indo-European languages) and to prove that Sanskrit was the language of the *Asuras* (pp. 105-106).